



Gilles de Rais

The Banned Lecture

by Aleister Crowley

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In the year of grace 1431, Gilles de Rais, Marshal of France, was burned at the stake in the city of Nantes. He had been found guilty of the most abominable crimes: the ritual murder of children, sodomy, and the invocation of demons. The trial records are still extant, and they make hideous reading.

The case of Gilles de Rais has always fascinated me. Here was a man of the highest rank, a companion-in-arms of Joan of Arc, a Marshal of France, who suddenly, at the age of thirty-six, plunged into the most revolting debauchery. What was the cause of this appalling transformation?

The official explanation is that he was possessed by the Devil. But this explanation, though comforting to the orthodox, is intellectually unsatisfying. I prefer to believe that Gilles de Rais was the victim of his own unbalanced genius. He was a man of immense vitality, of great intellectual power, and of strong will. But he lacked balance. He was a man of extremes. When he turned to evil, he turned to it with the same wholeheartedness with which he had previously turned to good.

The true interest of the case lies in the fact that Gilles de Rais was not a common criminal. He was a man of culture, a patron of the arts, a scholar. He possessed a magnificent library. He was interested in alchemy and in the occult sciences. He was, in short, a typical Renaissance figure — but a Renaissance figure gone wrong.

It is this aspect of the case that makes it so peculiarly modern. We live in an age that has seen the collapse of the old moral values. We have seen the rise of new religions, new moralities, new conceptions of good and evil. We have seen men of the highest intelligence and culture give themselves over to the most bestial practices. The case of Gilles de Rais is a warning to us all. It shows us what can happen when the old restraints are removed and the individual is left to his own devices.

The lesson of Gilles de Rais is that man is not naturally good. He is naturally a savage. Civilization is a thin veneer. Scratch it, and the beast appears. The only thing that keeps us from becoming Gilles de Rais is the fear of punishment and the hope of reward — in other words, the old morality. Remove that, and we are all capable of anything.